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DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 045 861 AA 000 649

AUTHOR Speck, David G.
TITLE Ombudsman on Campus: A Review
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Jan 71
NOTE 6p.; Currents '71 n1 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Counseling, Faculty Advisors, *Grievance Procedures, *Higher Education, *Ombudsmen, *Student College Relationship, Student Personnel Services, Student Welfare

ABSTRACT

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Institution (Source): ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education

Publication Date: January, 1971

Bureau No.: NA

Origin of Document: ERIC/HE

Clearinghouse Assigned: AA

Justification for QAD: Clearinghouse product

PAGES: 6p.
MF: $0.65
HC: $3.29

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ED Number: ED 045 861
AA Number: AA 000 649
RIE Issue: RIEMAY71
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| AA 000 649 | | Jan 71 | RIEMAY71 | | | |

AUTHOR
Speck, David G.

TITLE
Ombudsman on Campus: A Review

| SOURCE CODE | INSTITUTION (SOURCE) |
|---|---|
| BBBQ1751 | |
| SP. AG. CODE | SPONSORING AGENCY |
| | |

| EDRS PRICE | CONTRACT NO. | GRANT NO. |
|---|---|---|
| 0.65;3.29 | | |

| REPORT NO. | BUREAU NO. |
|---|---|
| | |

AVAILABILITY

JOURNAL CITATION

DESCRIPTIVE NOTE
6p.; Currents '71 n1 1971

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ED 045 861

# Currents '71

from the ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Number 1, January

## OMBUDSMAN ON CAMPUS: A REVIEW

A new position–the ombudsman–has come into the organizational structure of 50 American colleges and universities since 1966, and approximately 50 more schools are now considering the move (Rowland, 1970). During its brief history, the ombudsman appears to have made significant strides toward restoring the human factor to a complex and impersonal system of higher education.

The word ombudsman is borrowed from Sweden where it means agent or attorney. The position, which had distinct legal overtones, existed there for almost a century; but when the new constitution of 1809 established a democratic monarchy, it specifically provided for the appointment of a *Justitie-ombudsman* ("Procurator for Civil Affairs") by the Parliament to:

> . . . supervise the observance of laws and statutes as applied, in matters not coming under the Military Procurator, by the courts and by public officials and employees. . . institute proceedings before the competent courts against those who, in the execution of their official duties, have through partiality, favouritism, or other cause committed any unlawful act or neglected to perform their official duties properly (Sawer, 1964).

Since that time, the duties of the ombudsman have been modified and the prosecutor's role minimized. His main functions are to receive complaints of maladministration from citizens, investigate fully such complaints, report to the official and department responsible for righting the wrong, and carry out a continuous inspection of random departments and authorities at work. He does not have the power to overrule an official decision, and usually does not question use of discretionary power if it is within the law. Several countries–including Finland, Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, Japan, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union–have instituted positions patterned after the Swedish model (Sawer, 1964). Although many people have suggested that such a governmental function would be beneficial in the United States and legislation has been proposed in the Congress[1], it is on the campuses that a form of the ombudsman position is being implemented.

The greatly increased size of higher education institutions and the complexity of their administrative structures have resulted in a steady decline in personal contact among the major academic constituents–students, faculty, and administrators. Students, especially, have perceived a lack of concern for their individuality and have been loudest in voicing resentment. Perhaps the basic and most serious issue is that which is the focus of Gerald Farber's book, *The Student as Nigger* (1969) (earlier published as a paper, 1967). Farber contends that today's college student is a slave to the institution: he has no voice, little power to affect the course of the institution, and no ability to seek solutions to problems or redress for grievances.

The creations of the position of ombudsman is an attempt to decrease some of the frustrations caused by burgeoning size and/or impersonal bureaucracies. Not all of the 50 people filling such positions are called "Ombudsman." Often the title reflects the particular needs of the school; so he might be called "Counselor at Large," "Director of Innovations in Student Life," or "Consultant in Student Affairs" (Bloland and Nowak, 1968). He may be anything from a second-year law student (at the University of Texas) to a professor of labor relations, now past retirement age (at Cornell University). Specific titles or previous occupations are irrelevant except to the extent that the person serving as the ombudsman is recognized and respected by the university community as competent. Although the job description for the ombudsman may vary from school to school, the underlying theme is an awareness of the individual and the problems of the bureaucracy.

### Responsibilities

At the University of Washington, Ombudsman Dr. George Aagaard has six general areas of responsibility:

1. To serve as a source for information and assistance that is available to all University community members concerning both academic and non-academic rules, regulations, and procedures of the University;
2. To receive complaints from students and members of the faculty and staff about alleged inequities;
3. To bring any complaint to the attention of the appropriate University agency if it has not already been heard by the agency;
4. Investigate complaints already heard if the individual concerned still feels aggrieved and seeks to resolve the

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difficulty between the individual and the University agency involved;
5. Recommend redress to the President when the Ombudsman believes that an individual has been improperly treated and when the Ombudsman has been unable to resolve the matter himself;
6. Recommend to the President and to appropriate authorities such changes in rules, regulations, and procedures as he deems necessary or desirable (Aagaard, 1969).

At St. Cloud State College ("Working Draft. . . ," 1970), a proposal for a campus ombudsman presented six general premises in developing the position:
1. His two main functions are to receive and attempt to resolve individual student grievances pertaining to the College and to recommend procedural changes aimed at keeping student grievances at a minimum.
2. He has no authority to take disciplinary action, reverse decisions, or circumvent existing rules and regulations. He will supplement, not replace, other means of redress for student grievances.
3. He has access to all college offices and files, except medical or psychological records.
4. He will make periodic general, and widely publicized reports.
5. He will be responsible for establishing and maintaining confidential records.
6. He will have a private office conveniently located for students.

In a proposal ("Proposal for. . . ," 1969) for the creation of an ombudsman at Cornell University, Dean Kahn discussed in detail the position's five general functions: investigation, recommendation, information, encouragement of and participation in special services during emergencies, and encouragement of the establishment of counterparts to the ombudsman's office. This report also outlined some "don'ts" in the responsibilities of the office:

> a. he can, of course, exercise no powers that are beyond the legal authority of the University, although he may make recommendations concerning the authority of the University or of its constituent parts;
> b. he does not himself make University policy or replace established legislative or judicial procedures, although he may investigate any and all of these, raise questions about them, and make such recommendations as he feels proper for their improvement and efficient functioning;
> c. while he may have access to personal and personnel records, he must respect their confidentiality unless he has written permission from the affected parties for releasing the information;
> d. while he has wide latitude in making public his findings and recommendations, he must preserve the requests of the complainants that their anonymity be preserved.

From these and other descriptions of the functions of the ombudsman, a general description can be developed that outlines the role the ombudsman will perform, although the specific functions vary according to need from school to school and from situation to situation.
*Investigation.* At the request of an individual or group in the school community, the ombudsman will investigate instances of discrimination, misuse of power, or unreasonable penalty.
*Recommendation.* The ombudsman may recommend modifications of policies, procedures, or regulations that have caused a grievance or have the potential to do so, but he will not *make* modifications.
*Information.* The ombudsman will serve as a general information source for all members of the school community.
*Encouragement.* The ombudsman will encourage members of the university community to respond to complaints and grievances, to be aware of patterns of problems, and to develop an atmosphere in which his services will no longer be required.

**Personal Experiences**

The effectiveness of the position has been often discussed by those serving as ombudsman. Since the job deals with such intangible areas as personal interest in individual problems and a lessening of the complexity of the bureaucracy, its successes or failures are extremely difficult to document. The most common means of answering this question has been simply to show the wide range of questions and problems which come to the ombudsman's attention, and leave the decisions regarding his value up to those who have sought his assistance.

Dr. James Rust (1968), Ombudsman at Michigan State University, describes the problems that students bring to his attention as falling into three categories: those related to (1) the offices of the University Secretary and the Vice President for Business and Finance, (2) housing and social regulations, and (3) academic matters.

> Those related to the Vice President and Secretary's Offices include such things as comments ranging from the resigned to the enraged about increased tuition. Some just wanted to register their protest, others wanted help in getting a refund, still others were angry because they had to pay more than they had expected. . . I have even been asked whether I could fix a traffic ticket!. . . There are problems that students have encountered with respect to on-campus employment, such things as variable scales of remuneration or being fired without warning. . . and, of course, there were those who complained about the way football tickets are distributed. Complaints concerning housing range from "I don't like my roommates. How can I get another room?" through "How do I go about breaking my housing contract?" to "Why can't I study with my boy/girl friend in the dormitory lounge or in his/her room as long as we please?" Queries like these are referred to the appropriate authority in the office of the Dean of Students or of the Residence Halls or I inquire myself on the student's behalf. Those who do not live in University housing sometimes come to me with questions about breaking apartment leases, getting back deposits, or appealing to the committee which hears the cases of students who move off campus without permission. Some of these are referred to the legal aid division of student government or to people in the Dean of Students Office concerned with such matters.
>
> The third category is that of academic problems, which may in turn be divided into several sub-categories. For example, during registration I am asked by students who have flunked out of school (sometimes they are accompanied by their parents) to help them get back into school. I am glad to report that a few have been readmitted after the assistant deans had reconsidered the records. Another academic area where students appealed for help was that of registration. A considerable number came to me because they could not get into courses that they wanted or needed. Sometimes I was able to help but not always. I have had to explain various academic regulations, such as that which says that one must complete a full year of elementary foreign language in order to receive credit for any part of it.

Dr. Nelson Norman, Ombudsman at San Diego State College, notes (1968) that "... During the last semester, approximately one hundred and fifty non-referral type cases came to the office, and three other major group concerns involving from 10 to 50 students plus weeks of concentrated work." He listed his individual cases under the following headings: (1) Records and evaluations, 20 cases; (2) Outside college contacts, 24 cases; (3) Registration, 5 cases; (4) Dispute with faculty member or policy, 29 cases; (5) Admission and readmission to the school, 20 cases; (6) Financial difficulty, 4 cases; (7) College regulations, fees, parking 22 cases; (8) Residency (instate tuition determination), 32 cases; (9) Residence halls, apartments, parietal hours, 9 cases; (10) Administrative machinery malfunctions, 12 cases.

Mrs. Alice Cook (1970), ombudswoman at Cornell University, had a total of 136 cases and 52 inquiries during the period of September 22, 1969 to January 30, 1970. She found that complaints came from faculty and staff, employees, individuals from the community, alumni, parents, faculty families, and, of course, students. She was able to classify complaints under 33 different categories, not including nine cases under "miscellaneous."

**Reporting to the Community**

Like municipal governments, many universities have some type of "checks and balance" system in which the activities and recommendations of the ombudsman are reviewed–not so much for a stamp of approval as a means of informing the university community. Generally, this reporting should be directed to a reasonably high-level group, including students, faculty, and probably administrators. On a frequent and continuing basis, the ombudsman should communicate with the president or, if not the president, the university official from whom he receives his authority.

Through this reporting system, the ombudsman satisfies two important purposes. First, he brings certain patterns of potential or realized problems to the attention of an important university official; and second, he utilizes the power of public interest by bringing to the attention of his constituents–the university community–what he is doing and what needs to be done.

In dealing with specific problems or questions, some ombudsmen prefer to keep detailed records, while others choose only to scribble a few notes, if that much. There are some advantages in detailing the work of the ombudsman. It allows him to study patterns of particular problems more closely, and it produces an on-going record of his activities. Concern over the loss of confidentiality has prompted some ombudsmen to keep all records under lock and key. Mrs. Alice Cook is planning to have her records kept by the University archives for release many years hence. There does not seem to be any one rule for the maintenance of records, but most ombudsmen seem to avoid keeping records which could cause irreparable harm to an individual's reputation.

**Terms of Appointment**

Several ombudsmen have suggested, and most seem to agree (Cook, 1970; Norman, 1968; Rowland, 1969; Rust, 1968), that a specific appointment of two or three years is desirable. A one-year reappointment system or tenure system is undesirable because it has the tendency to stress performance as the criterion for continued appointment. It is important to note that there is no such concept (and probably never will be) of a professional ombudsman in higher education. The ombudsman generally plans to return to his original field of interest after a specific term of appointment as ombudsman. However, it *is* necessary for the ombudsman to have a time period of more than one year to develop the position within his own framework, and to be free of the political pressures of regular reappointment.

San Diego State's Nelson Norman (1968) supplemented some of the specific concerns of ombudsmen with a check list of provisions which must be considered in developing the position:

1. Length of term, method of appointment and termination.
2. Clear statement of accessibility to officials, records, committee meetings and minutes, organs of communication.
3. Clarification of his role: is he the faculty's, administration's, or the student's man? To whom, if anyone, does he report? Is he responsible or answerable to any official or body?
4. What types of problems can he accept? Is secrecy assured?
5. What help is available for informational and referral functions?
6. What official status does he have in regular campus structures?
7. What ultimate power does he have to advance stalemated but justified appeals?
8. What aspects of the job are left to the discretion of the appointee? Office management? Method of operation? Records kept?
9. Who pays his salary, and what strings does that imply?
10. What guarantees are provided for his invulnerability?

Obviously, all of the above questions should be qualified with a consideration of the particular needs of the school.

Howard Rowland (1969) went further than Norman in delineating aspects of both the institution and the job that are important to the effectiveness of a college or university ombudsman:

1. The institution with a campus ombudsman should have a relatively stable organizational structure, supported and trusted by most of the people within it most of the time.
2. The office of ombudsman should be equivalent in salary and prestige to high-level academic and administrative positions.
3. The campus ombudsman should be a long-term faculty member at the institution, experienced in teaching and advising, and highly respected by students, colleagues, and administrators. Regardless of his academic discipline, he should have some rudimentary knowledge of law and be thoroughly acquainted with the civil ombudsman concept.
4. He should be carefully selected by a committee representing students, faculty, and administration. The actual appointment should be made or confirmed by the governing board of the institution upon the recommendation of its chief administrative officer.
5. He should be appointed for a two-year term, renewable by mutual agreement of the ombudsman and the selection committee.
6. The ombudsman should make widely publicized, periodic general reports to all members of the institution. He also may make confidential reports with recommendations to the chief administrative officer, who should determine the extent of their circulation.
7. While serving as ombudsman, he should not be required to teach or perform other faculty duties.

8. He should have a private office, apart from the main administration building and easily accessible to students, with a secretary but not a staff.
9. The ombudsman should be receptive to individual student grievances, both academic and non-academic, concerning the institution. He should decide which complaints are within his jurisdiction and competence and which of those merit his investigation.
10. He should use reasoned persuasion to bring about redress of genuine student grievances as expeditiously and equitably as possible.
11. Where a pattern of student grievances develops, he should work for a change in regulations, procedures, or personnel to prevent recurrance.
12. He should not conduct investigations on his own initiative but rather in response to student complaints.
13. The ombudsman should have access to all campus offices and files, except medical, psychological, and classified government records.
14. He should keep confidential records on each case he considers.
15. When rebuffed during an investigation, he should have the authority to appeal to the chief administrative officer for intervention.
16. He should not have authority to take disciplinary action, reverse decisions, or circumvent regulations. His power should lie in his prestige, persuasiveness, and persistence in stating his views to persons involved in a grievance and, if necessary, to their organizational superiors.
17. He should supplement, not supercede, other means of redress for student grievances.
18. Decisions about continuing the office should be based on systematic sampling of students who have consulted the ombudsman.

Although there will be differing opinions on some points–for example, the third point which confines selection of an ombudsman from the senior faculty ranks only–Rowland's list of the working conditions of an ombudsman could justifiably serve as the bible for any school considering such a position.

**Filling The Position**

When a school has made its decision to create an ombudsman position, and after it has determined his duties, the next step is to attempt to find someone, preferably sane, who would accept such a job.

A critical concern in selecting an individual is that he have the support of the university or college community, but be independent of all–independent to the extent that he is viewed as not having a bias toward any one group, be it students, faculty, or administration. In most cases, the president, with the concurrence of the board of trustees, will have the final decision-making power for the appointment. A significant amount of community involvement can be utilized, and probably should be because of the sensitivity of the position. One of the more effective procedures is to request each major governing body–i.e., the faculty senate, the student senate, and perhaps an alumni governing body–to present a list of individuals, not necessarily from among their own constituents. A selection committee composed of representatives from each body would then consider the lists and begin screening the candidates by first informing each of his nomination for the position. At that point, any candidate unwilling to be considered could be eliminated. Extensive screening including personal interviews would be performed by the selection committee, who would then submit a list of all remaining candidates ranked in order of preference to the president. In this manner, the person finally selected would be basically independent of any one group or affiliation.

**Benefits**

Although the position of ombudsman is new in American higher education and has had relatively limited acceptance, the ombudsmen themselves and those who have utilized their services contend that it has produced definite benefits. J. Benton White (1968), ombudsman at San Jose State College, draws some tentative conclusions on the value of the ombudsman after serving in that position for 1 year. The ombudsman can: restore a sense of accessibility to the student; furnish alternative channels to at least some of the confrontations taking place; help form administrative decisions; offer some hope that *real* concerns are not lost in the shuffle of events; assure students that he is not there to defend the "status-quo"; help bring about equality for all in the college community; and help overcome the administration's tendency to deal with complaints by reinforcing current procedures rather than meeting the problems causing the grievances.

Dr. Nelson Norman (1968) at San Diego State estimated that approximately two-thirds to three-fourths of the students seeing him received the help they desired, one-fifth presented situations "... which would require restructuring the whole institution or persuading the governor to change his mind, and five to ten percent were not successful due to my mishandling or other circumstances."

As part of his doctoral dissertation, Dr. Ray Rowland surveyed students who had consulted the campus ombudsman at Michigan State University during the Fall semester, 1968. He reported (1969):

> Nearly half of the 218 students surveyed had taken their problems to two or more persons in authority before consulting the ombudsman. Two-thirds indicated that the problems they brought to the ombudsman were completely or partially solved, while one-third considered their problems "not solved at all." Two-thirds of the respondents thought the campus ombudsman helped relieve student frustration and hostility. None wanted to see the functions of the ombudsman discontinued, although one-third recommended changes. Nearly all indicated that they would return to the ombudsman if they had similar problems and would recommend him to other students. Only 13 of 207 respondents claimed to have experienced "unpleasant treatment" by anyone concerned with their complaints after they consulted the ombudsman.

**Gimmickry?**

The only writer to criticize strongly the ombudsman concept, Earle Clifford, Dean of Student Affairs at Rutgers University, argues (1968) that establishment of the ombudsman merely compounds the problems of institutional bureaucracy, and that permissive institutions and over-demanding youth are the causes of organizational weaknesses–not the organizational structure itself. He contends that the ombudsman is "educational gimmickry" in its focus on the effects rather than the causes of an institution's problems, and that an effective student personnel staff can adequately assume the duties of an ombudsman and avoid one more step for students

in the resolution of problems. However, although a dynamic and respected dean of students can do much to affect the mood of a campus, student personnel workers are often unable to deal effectively with controversy over academic matters. Administrators, regardless of faculty status, are usually not viewed as academians by faculty members, who generally resist attempts by nonacademic personnel to control their performance. Both administrators and faculty have, in fact, occasionally resented the presence of an ombudsman. As Monroe Rowland stated (1970), "... the very fact that the ombudsman is hired because of problems in the system, and to change the system, is a threat."

In addition, while it would be convenient to use an already existing administrative position, the administrator functioning as an ombudsman should have more authority than that of the dean of students. He should have access to anyone or any section within the institution, and the only administrator with that type of power now is the president. Unfortunately, most college and university presidents do not have time for the duties of an ombudsman, so schools that have developed the position have delegated certain presidential powers to the ombudsman. At Michigan State University, for example, Ombudsman Dr. James D. Rust functions–like the dean of students–as a traffic cop, directing students throughout the bureaucracy. Unlike the dean of students, however, Dr. Rust has the organizational authority to follow up a referral–by crossing departmental lines if necessary–to insure that the student's questions or problems have been dealt with adequately.

Herein lies one of the most critical concepts of the ombudsman. Any office with the necessary knowledge at hand can be set up as an information and referral center. Students can be instructed to come to this office if they have problems and questions, and referrals will be made to the specialized office which, theoretically, is prepared to meet the situation. However, as long as this referral office remains a part of the bureaucracy, its power is limited, for there are usually other offices with similar administrative authority. The ombudsman, on the other hand, has no organizational affiliation to a specific office except to that of the president or chief executive officer. Having access to all offices and all officials, he is able to see that decisions are not made without the benefit of careful consideration and that there are means to rectify problems.

Rowland (1969) reports that:

> The Michigan State ombudsman maintains that so-called minor grievances... can break the morale of individual students, and that this breakdown can spread throughout a student body. He believes that more attention can be devoted to the larger institutional problems of curriculum, evaluation, admissions, and governance if someone corrects the smaller neglects and defects in the system. And that someone is the ombudsman.

Here again, many current staff members could function as an ombudsman, but either through organizational controls, lack of time or effort, or failure to see the need for such duties, the job doesn't get done. And educators and administrators, with limited knowledge of the ombudsman, view him as the official who will put an end to campus dissidence and unrest. He will not and cannot, and any attempt to use the ombudsman in such a capacity will seriously weaken his position.

**Crisis Situations**

Because, however, the ombudsman is viewed (ideally) as an honest, fair, and impartial arbitrator, it is unreasonable not to expect that he will be called upon for administrative assistance during crisis situations. Nelson Norman (1968) notes that his role is primarily to help students solve their individual problems before they expand to group size or require extra procedural action; but he goes on to describe a particular emergency situation at San Diego State in which he proved to be helpful:

> Students and the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) as well as some other groups were sponsoring a convocation in the center of our campus in which I took part as one of many speakers. Hours later there began a long and complicated incident involving 250 students from the convocation. They decided to move into a nearby meeting of the Faculty Senate to exert pressure on consideration of a topic in which they were interested. A tense situation ensued, during which as moderator, the Ombudsman ran back and forth between podium and crowd, feeling much like an interloper in the sanctuary at a pontifical high mass. In brief, the students settled for discussion rather than disruption, and accepted our assurances that students would be heard in shaping policy.

Some ombudsmen would, perhaps, disapprove of the fairly active role that Dr. Norman played, but it is important to note that every institution of higher education is unique, and that what one ombudsman can do may not be true for another. As long as the ombudsman can avoid taking sides or being viewed as a "tool of the administration," there are generally few rules to govern his actions in such crises. As Rowland (1969) stated:

> Few non-teaching roles in higher education are as demanding, yet allow as much latitude for individual style and personality, as that of the ombudsman. He seems to perform best where he has a specific mandate, vague guidelines, and broad support. Although the campus ombudsman can influence improvements in institutional policies and procedures, much of his day-to-day activity involves individual casework where results are long-term and cumulative and difficult to assess.

Although it has great potential usefulness, the ombudsman is still a controversial position, often misunderstood (more often mispronounced) and sometimes resented. Nelson Norman (1969) sums it up well when he writes,

> ... a motto for the position might be: "Maximum Service and Significant Change Rapidly". Another college or university with all conditions different, still would find the office serviceable. There can be no single pattern: the assignment is capable of widest changes. "Ombudsman" is the greatest word in projective psychology since "Rorschach": everyone can make of it what he wants.

*David G. Speck*

**FOOTNOTE**

[1]U.S. Representative Henry S. Reuss proposed establishment of a Congressional ombudsman to consider individuals' allegations concerning the improper use of power or improper penalty (Rowat, 1968). Ombudsmen have been appointed in the U.S. on the state, municipal, and corporate levels.

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